

***Paving the Way for Solar: A video story of two individuals a part of the Solarize East Central  
Indiana Movement***

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

*Rachel Ellis*

**Thesis Advisor**

*Martin Smith-Rodden*

**Ball State University**

**Muncie, Indiana**

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## Abstract

The state of the earth's climate has been debated heavily on social, political and economic levels for years. The shift into renewable energy has been a widespread movement across the country and around the world as advancements in technology have increased. Sustainability has become a priority on a local and national scale as more people are taking a look into how to combat climate change. For my thesis, I decided to look into ways Muncie is sustainable, which led me to my video project on Carolyn and John Vann, two Muncie residents who have a lot of knowledge on various subjects and a passion for greenness. This video project combines photos and video narrating the Vann's involvement and experiences with the Solarize East Central Indiana Movement, a movement that encourages home owners in the region, including Muncie, to go solar. Their time spent volunteering to give presentations on the benefits of renewable energy and advocating for going solar has inspired more than 30 homeowners to go solar, while they themselves also adopted solar panels for their home in the process. They have educated many in their quest to encourage people to do their part to make this world a better place.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor and mentor Martin Smith-Rodden for guiding me through this story-telling journey. He pushed me to go above and beyond with this project and helped me turn it into something I can be proud of and use for my portfolio.

I would like to thank Ryan Sparrow for teaching me how to use his drone for this project and coming out to the Vann's property to assist me with my visuals.

I would like to thank my dear friend Zoe Harvey for introducing me to Carolyn. Without her connection and idea to pursue this story, my thesis would have never been a reality.

I would like to thank Carolyn and John Vann for inviting me into their home, educating me on all things solar, and allowing me to tell their story. They are truly inspiring individuals that I am lucky to have met.

## Process Analysis Statement

When considering what I wanted to do for my honors thesis, I immediately knew it had to be something related to my major, photojournalism. I have always had an innate passion to tell stories, to learn visually, and to express myself through photography, therefore, I knew that I had incorporate these interests into my creative project.

My journey began when my dear friend, Zoe, told me about a woman who frequently went to the YMCA whom she had befriended. Carolyn Vann, Zoe said, was a person with a story worth telling. Being the curious human that I am, I felt inclined to reach out to Carolyn to see if she'd be willing to meet with me to tell me more about herself and the life she has lived because it sounded fascinating. So, I sent her an email, and the next thing I knew we were sitting in the Student Center yapping away about ourselves. That's when I came to learn about Carolyn's efforts to help Muncie become a more sustainable community. Oddly enough, I timed my first encounter with her just right because she was just beginning her involvement with the Solarize East Central Indiana Movement, a volunteer-based movement that encourages people to go solar. I asked Carolyn if I could photograph her involvement and document her progress, and she willingly agreed to let me shadow her and become a part of her life. From there, my thesis was born.

My rough idea was to create a photographic essay, or essentially, create pictures with lengthy captions that would be presented in the form of an essay. Up until this point in my education, I hadn't spent this much time or effort on a story, so I felt that a photo essay would



boost my experience as a journalist. When I began working through my ideas with my advisor, Martin Smith-Rodden, he was very uneasy that Carolyn's advocacy work would be a challenging thing to visually capture. We story-boarded initial photo ideas: get Carolyn at meetings, get her presenting to the public, document her at home....capture anything and everything remotely related to her efforts. Knowing that I would be challenged to come up with 15 to 20 unique, powerful images to use for this project intimidated me at first. It didn't sound like a lot until I realized that meetings and presentations didn't vary much visually. I knew that I had to build a close relationship with Carolyn in order to get what I needed. That was when I realized I had to push myself to send countless emails, leave dozens of voicemails, and continue to follow up on a weekly basis to make sure that I was present for as much as possible. Carolyn happily filled me in on her schedule, and I worked around mine in order to attend as many events as possible.

Although I intended for this project to be focused on photography, the other big piece of this project required me to educate myself on solar energy and sustainability. Luckily, Carolyn and her husband John, the other character in my story, helped me learn the basics of these topics. I would have casual lunch meetings with them where we would chat about the different aspects of solar energy: the economical side, the political side, the social side. I was able to gain the knowledge I needed to have a well-rounded understanding of why this is important for the environment and why it matters to Carolyn and John. Anytime I didn't understand something, or wanted to know more, Carolyn and John gladly took the time to explain things to me or send me pages of links that I could refer to. My bond with the Vann's grew deeper, and I felt very comfortable with them and could tell they trusted me and enjoyed my company. In addition to

their knowledge and insights, the Vann's also helped me meet other individuals who were going solar. In February, I spent an entire week photographing Indira, a friend of the Vann's, and her solar installation for her house. In the peak of the rainy season, I was out on the roof with installers taking pictures, engaging with them and having them show me and teach me things I hadn't known or could develop a deeper understanding of, and Indira and I became very close in the process. Although the photos I collected were independent of my project, I knew that showing up to the installation would only aid me in my understanding of solar energy. I witnessed the installation process up-close, and it helped me to visually see what it's like for a homeowner to go solar. After documenting one installation, I felt confident that I could use my experience to make photographs for my project that would be visually interesting.

Aside from the Vann's activism, they were anticipating going solar themselves. But the wait for Carolyn and John's installation was agonizing. Although they had been advocating for people to go solar, they had struggled to get solar panels of their own because of where they lived. It took months for them to prepare their backyard barn to have panels put on. I asked Carolyn every week for a month when their installation was scheduled to start, only to be told "sometime soon." I was nervous that time was not on my side, and although I was happy for them, my patience was growing weary. Everything I had done so far was leading up to this moment, and I wanted things to be perfect. It wasn't until April when Carolyn finally gave me the dates of their installation, and it was only one day long, so I made sure that regardless of my schedule, that I could make it out to their home in Springport, Indiana to document the installation. In the time I spent waiting for the dates, I made arrangements to have my professor,



Ryan Sparrow, get clearance to use a drone. He came out on the day of the installation and helped me fly his equipment so that I could get even more variety in my pictures! Things were finally coming together, and I felt like I was on top of the world. I knew exactly what to expect for the installation and Carolyn and John were so thrilled that it drove a lot of my photos to have candid emotion in them. I was finally piecing the remaining parts of my project together.

Towards the end of the spring semester, I finally felt ready to put together my photo essay. Overtime, I collected images that I felt worthy to include, so between the drone photos and the one's I had gotten from November to May, I felt that it was time to put all the photos together and build my photographic essay. My original intention was to use all of the information I learned and photos I had taken to make an essay that was informative but narrated Carolyn and John's experiences, however, the course of my project took a turn after six months of taking pictures. When my advisor and I met before the school year was over to go over my work, his reaction was not at all what I expected. Although I had a substantial amount of photos, Martin seemed hesitant to approve. After showing him everything I had worked on, he looked at me thoughtfully and said, "let's make a video." I remember my face turning red, my heart dropping to the pit of my stomach, and a part of me felt like rejecting his idea and giving up entirely. I had spent the majority of my spring semester and even some of my fall semester taking pictures, not video! It was hard to understand why he felt that was the route to take, especially since I felt that I had no time or energy to do what seemed like starting over. But after hearing Martin's perspective, I realized he saw the potential in a video, and the work I had done up until then was all a part of the coming to that realization. He wanted to take my project to the next

level, and even though I lack experience with multimedia stories, he had faith in me that I could have an even stronger final product. Even though my initial response was negative, I reconciled with his suggestion and decided to reach out to Carolyn and John and explain to them that my work was far from finished.

Thankfully, Carolyn and John were very understanding and supportive. Our relationship had evolved, and they were more than willing to have me come over to conduct on camera interviews and document their lives once more. Martin had advised me on what to record, but ultimately it was up to me how I gathered materials for my video. I felt a little uncertain about my ability to be successful, but I was determined to make Martin proud and prove to myself that I was capable of turning this project into a video. I spent one last day with Carolyn and John, and at the end of our video session, we sat down, ate lunch, and reminisced on the past six months of knowing each other. Carolyn and John had raised awareness on solar energy all over Muncie. Being in their mid-seventies, they replaced what should've been retirement for almost a year of advocacy. And I was there through it all: several presentations in libraries and churches, education sessions at their home, and two installations. It was a moment where all three of us felt proud of each other, and that was one of the moments that solidified this entire experience for me.

Martin and I had scheduled a time to meet a short week after my final meeting with Carolyn and John. After some phone calls back and forth, I was expected to have a rough video edited together of what I had, and we'd go from there. My experience editing video is subpar, but I expected to be able to get everything together fairly quick. However, my first meeting with

Martin showed me that this process was going to be long, tedious work. As a professional editor, journalist and photographer, Martin's expectation to have a strong, portfolio-worthy, video made the process of editing a very lengthy one. Not only did we work longer on my video than expected, but we ran into audio problems that challenged us to go above and beyond and edit to the extreme. Martin's attention to detail led us to watch clips a hundred times over. We constantly made changes, and Martin opened up my eyes to the reality of editing video. After meeting two or three times, I was getting anxious. I didn't feel pleased with myself because of all the post-production work that went into what I thought was a simple video. I was growing tired of watching the same clips over and over, and every meeting I thought we would finish when in actuality every meeting dragged out the to-do list even more. This was the second time in this process that I felt like giving up. As a person who tends to put an excessive amount of pressure on herself, my passion for this project grew sour, and I just wanted to be done with it. But, deep down, I knew that I had to shake the negativity and pity-party I was throwing myself, because I was committed to finishing strong and once again proving that I was capable of producing a compelling story. It took one final push, granted, a seven-hour work day, to officially complete my video. Two minutes and 45 seconds of photo, video, and audio was pieced together to become my finalized honors thesis. Pressing play the final time after exporting my video was one of the most satisfactory, relieving feelings I've ever experienced. I was officially done, I was exhausted, but most importantly, I did it.

Juggling school, work, a social life, and my extracurriculars made it seem impossible to dedicate the time that was necessary to fulfill the expectations I had for myself and this project. I



wanted to feel like a journalist; someone who was able to dedicate all her time to her work and nothing else. I wanted this to be a realistic, newsroom experience. And for the most part, I would say this was that and more. Aside from occasional check-ins with my advisor, this project was entirely my own. I set my own deadlines and I did all the scheduling and planning. I was my own story-teller, photographer, and editor. I held myself accountable for showing up to take pictures and to continue to pursue any opportunity to take photos. It was no easy feat. There were times where I went multiple weeks without photographing anything, and I felt behind, unmotivated, and uninspired. There were times I lost sight of what my true goal for this project was: to produce something meaningful and powerful. There were moments I wanted to give up or turn back and try something easier. In the end, though, the challenges I faced were more beneficial than anything I could've imagined.

The main thing I learned from this project was how to adapt. Regardless of what direction I take with photojournalism, I know it will be a difficult journey with ups and downs. I know that I have high aspirations for myself, and I know that my passion and work ethic will allow me to live a fulfilling life doing what makes me happy. However, I can't always expect things to go as planned. Clearly, things change whether I plan for them to or not. I know that sometimes I try to have everything figured out when in reality, I have to take things one day at a time. Although there were times I felt like a failure, or that everything was falling apart, there was always something that pulled me back in, something that reminded me why I began this journey in the first place. Of course, it's important to look at the big picture, but something this project and my college career all together has taught me is how to chip away piece by piece at the

tasks and goals I have laid out. I try to do things all at once, and instead of focusing on one thing at a time, I overwhelm myself with too much. This project taught me how to be in control of the things I know I could, while also understanding that things like time, change and obstacles are out of my control, and all I can do is find a way to cope with struggles and move forward. I have to stay patient, and tackle things one at a time. I have a better sense of how to simplify even the messiest of days, and although I still let little things get me down, I have learned how to persevere and stay focused on the positives. I am so grateful that this opportunity presented itself to me, and that I had the support and assistance that I did in the process. I made a meaningful connection with two people who care about this earth and the future of it. It's that part of the experience that will continue to inspire me for years to come.

This experience also allowed me to grow my passion for story-telling. Every story I tell, every photo I take, every person I encounter becomes a part of my larger journey of discovering what I want to with my life. It's easy to feel lost or insecure about my skills as a journalist. I can't express how many times I've compared myself to my peers and even professionals, and all too often I slip into a negative, doubtful headspace. But this project allowed me to thrive! I was able to take an idea and turn it into a tangible, significant project. Whether it's good enough to other people or not, I am proud of the work that I accomplished in these six months. I reaffirmed that photojournalism is the path for me. I pushed myself to do something I hadn't before and most importantly, I accomplished something greater than myself. I revealed more about who I am and my passion to pursue human interest stories, while also seeing that I have an interest in the environment and sustainability. This project is a stepping stone in my life-long journey to

becoming a successful photojournalist. I want to utilize the work that I did for this project and build off of it. I can build upon the communication skills I gained. I learned how essential it is to stay in touch with the people involved in my reporting. I had to constantly give Martin updates and show him the progress, or lack of progress I made. I have a better understanding of how to build a relationship with my subjects, how to follow up with them, and how to connect with them on a personal level. I value the chances I have to meet new people and get to know them, and this project introduced me to two people who are older and wiser than me. I am very thankful for the chance I was given to document the Vann's activism, and its relationships like the one I have with them that motivates me to continue to pursue the art of story-telling. Ultimately, I know that I am doing what I love.

Finally, this project showed me the possibilities in life. There are so many opportunities and things to look forward to. It's overwhelming to know that there are so many directions to go from here, but it's also exciting to know that my options are essentially limitless. This process has taught me that I am capable of anything I put my mind to. Although it does take resilience, trial and error, and determination, I am ready to take the plunge into life after graduation. And regardless of the progress I feel that I am making, I am constantly growing. I know I'll always be a little confused about my life and where it's going, but I can say with confidence that I'm going somewhere exciting. My time at Ball State has felt short, but in three years, I have evolved into the person I am, and I'm proud to be the independent, diligent, ambitious young woman I am today.